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VOICES OF WOMEN

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

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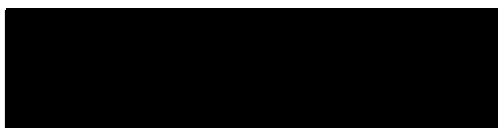
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DECLARATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



Denise Desmarchelier

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ABSTRACT

The paucity of material, especially in Australia, on how women experience the Catholic Church and other Christian churches, is evidence that women and their reality have been held in little account by the church. With the increasing alienation of women in the church, especially in the Catholic Church, an urgent need was seen to exist for this present study.

Because the teaching voice of the Catholic Church is that of the male hierarchy, women are spoken for by men; women themselves lack voice. This study seeks to fill this void and give to Catholic women their own voice.

The guiding research question is addressed specifically to a group calling themselves Women and the Australian Church (WATAC): 'How do women experience the church and desire change within the church?'. The study seeks to explore attitudes of these women in order to understand their social setting and its meaning from their perspective. Essentially the study explores what is real for women through their articulation of their experience.

The methodological framework is essentially phenomenological. Ethnographic tools and survey techniques were used to obtain data. Initial data were obtained via a survey of all members of WATAC (NSW). In-depth data were gathered from key informant interviews of Catholic lay women who were selected from the survey responses.

Findings indicate strong emergent patterns: love-pain tension between church as a worshipping community of believers and hierarchical structures; a we-they dichotomy between laity and clergy, women and men; and common issues

addressing the questions of ‘what does it mean to be Catholic?’ and ‘why stay in the church?’.

The study establishes that WATAC women desire to be heard in the Australian Catholic Church, their love for and loyalty to the church are demonstrable and their collective insights warrant consideration. It establishes that Vatican II is pivotal in understanding the tension and dichotomy within the present church. This tension and dichotomy are seen as reaction to change that has occurred and is still occurring, and as an indication of the need for further change. Language about church is seen as a tool of social construction and thus can be used as a means of initiating grass roots change.

Implications are drawn for laity, especially women, and for church leaders. These relate to issues of empowerment and leadership, and what women and church leaders might do in order that an inclusive Catholic Church that incorporates the experience and expertise of women comes into being. The study also offers prospects for research that might pick up on themes arising from this study.

GLOSSARY

Acronyms

ACBC - The Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference

CDF - Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

WATAC – Women and the Australian Church

Latin terms

Gaudium et Spes – Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

Humanae Vitae – Of Human Life

Lumen Gentium – Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

Mulieris Dignitatem – On the Dignity of Women

Ordinatio Sacerdotalis – On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone

Sensus fidelium, sensus fidei – sense of the faithful, sense of the faith – doctrine of reception that teaching is confirmed when the Christian community affirms it

Other terms

Annulment – determination in church law that there was not a marriage because a requirement for validity was absent at the time of the marriage contract

Christian anthropology – religious teaching about the origin, nature and destination of the human person in relation to God

Christian Scriptures, Hebrew Scriptures – New and Old Testaments

Christology – theology of Christ

Council – ecclesial gathering of the bishops of the universal church to consider doctrine, discipline, morals or the relation of the church to world problems

Curia – the juridical and administrative institutions of church government comprising congregations, e.g. CDF, tribunals, chancery and secretariat

Ecclesiology – theology of the church

Ecclesial – pertaining to the church

Encyclical – papal letter

Laity – all who are not ordained

Lector – lay reader at Mass of Scripture other than the Gospel

Minister of the Eucharist – lay assistant in the distribution of communion at Mass

Synod – meeting of bishops from a region e.g. Synod of the Bishops of Oceania, or on a topic e.g. Synod on the Family

Vatican II – the Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965